DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 358 CS 213 812

AUTHOR Van Decker, Lori
TITLE When You Do It for Money, Is the Customer Always Right?
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business Communication; *Consultants; *Consultation Programs; Higher Education; Improvement Programs; Professional Training; Teaching Styles; *Technical Writing; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Discourse Communities; Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

Any college English teacher who seriously seeks to bridge the academic and corporate learning communities must learn from rather than laugh at the industrial mindset. Mediating between composition theorists' process-oriented pedagogies and the type of linear writing instruction the corporate mind values is essential in the corporate classroom. The writing consulting business is business, and if academics are going to play ball in corporate fields, they need to adapt their pedagogies to corporate rules. Three simple guidelines will help college teachers practice the requisite art of mediation in the corporate classroom: (1) don't use the "F" word--freewriting--in a corporate classroom. Use more pragmatic terms like "Speed Drafting" for free writing, or "Mind Mapping" for clustering, "Thinking on Paper" for brainstorming; (2) avoid condescension toward business people's use of jargon--composition teachers also have a widely used set of jargon all their own; (3) mediate between the notions of process and revision that composition teachers respect and linear models that the business and technical communities value by breaking down the revision process into a set of clearly defined linear steps. Bridging the academic and business learning communities and becoming strong competitors in the writing consulting business means realizing that in the corporate environment, the process of teaching writing, like the transactional writing process itself, is largely a matter of re-vision, of re-seeing what writing teachers have to offer through the eyes of potential clients and re-casting pedagogies in terms that have meaning for those clients. (SAM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED357358

Lori Van Decker
Rutgers University
Department of English
Murray Hall, PO Box 5054
New Brunswick, N.J. 08903-5054

Paper presented at 1993 4 C's Meeting Roundtable: "And Then You Do It for Money: Issues and Answers for the Writing Teacher /Consultant."

When You Do It for Money, Is the Customer Always Right?

My first experience as a corporate writing consultant was at AT&T Bell Laboratories, where I conducted a class for physicists, mathematicians, computer programmers, and engineers--all of whom hated writing. Some were former M.I.T. and Cal Tech professors who had left behind academic publication pressures only to be overwhelmed by the pressures to publish within the corporate think tank. They were not a happy group, but they had a lot in common. Nearly everyone expressed the same reason for attending the course: "I can't get started on writing projects"; "I sit for hours writing and erasing the same sentence"; "I never know where to start."

Happily, I began the second class by introducing freewriting. You should have seen their horror-stricken faces! One mathematician quickly pointed out that he was "a logical, organized person!" He simply "couldn't do this free thing!" A physicist added: "This is cute, but what we really need to know is, is it really okay to begin a sentence with 'because?'" Even more discouraging was the comment from a computer programmer who

CS213812

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Lori Van Decker
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

simply wanted to stop this freewriting stuff right away: "Can't you tell us how to start? You know, just give us the right sentences to use." I wanted to run for cover, until I realized that the anxiety being vented was not aimed toward me nor even toward the concept of freewriting, but toward the term itself.

"Freewriting." We use the term all of the time, hardly giving a thought to how it might sound to people outside of our discourse community. To the eighteen-year-old freshman English student, freewriting is no big deal. But to these members of the corporate community, the mere term--"Freewriting"--seemed like something from the sixties--something "touchy and feely"--and my enthusiasm for it probably made me seem like the quintessential "hippie writing teacher from hell," or at the very least, like some dippy, under-disciplined humanities scholar who could not possibly function in the "real world."

To the corporate ear, "Freewriting" sounds ineffectual. While we all know that no one can improve their writing overnight, corporate employees want to come away from a class meeting or seminar with sound "knowledge" that they can put to use immediately upon returning to their workstations. It's not all that difficult to see how, in a businessperson's or scientist's view, "freewriting" would have very little measurable utility.

Perhaps that is why many of our strategies have been adopted and subsequently renamed by the business community. For example, several publications for executive women and men have recently

run articles on "mind mapping," which is a renamed version of "clustering." You must admit, though, that making a "map" of one's "mind" sounds much more efficient, effective, and generally more sophisticated than making a "circle diagram" or "clustering ideas," despite the fact that in practice all three activities are identical.

We laugh at these minor semantic differences. But any College English teacher who seriously is seeking to bridge the academic and corporate learning communities must learn from rather than laugh at the industrial mindset. In this age of the "arbitrariness of the signifier," it is all too easy to be condescending toward the pragmatic tags that business has pinned on our concepts; nevertheless, we need to understand both the corporate worker and the corporation he or she--and we, as consultants--work for. Not unreasonably, the corporation and the employee want to feel that time and money are being well spent. In such an environment, "Mind Mapping" presents a much more effective, cost-efficient remedy than "Clustering," which, outside of composition studies, reminds most T.V. viewers of breakfast cereal and squirrels.

We need to mediate between the process-oriented pedgagogies we know will help people deal more effectively with transactional writing activities, and the type of linear writing instruction that the corporate mind values. In a contemporary textbook offering, writing consultant Caroline Bloomfield and college professor Irene Fairley have teamed up to present

process-oriented strategies that they hope will demystify the unwieldy business writing process and "help you write efficiently, effectively, and creatively" (3). While readers are reminded that the step-by-step "procedures" are merely prods to encourage thinking on paper, the real appeal of the heuristics can be located in the affective connotations suggested by their names: "Objectives Checklist," "Solution Grid," "Options Evaluation," all of which suggest no-nonsense formulae for solving business problems, even though the "procedures" themselves are simply guide forms and matrices for listing and categorizing data.

As someone who began teaching in the age of Emig and Elbow, Bizzell and Bartholomae, Barthes and Bahktin, and even Derrida and DeMan, I've been conditioned to reject anything that even <u>looks</u> like a linear, step-by-step, "how-to" approach to the recursive writing process as reductive, problematic, and "dangerously" misleading--but that's in terms of <u>theory</u>. I've learned not to dismiss linear approaches in the corporate classroom, where I'm paid to provide my audience with what it expects: sound, practical advice and guidance.

My point is simple: The writing consulting business <u>is</u> a <u>business</u>, and if academics are going to play ball in corporate fields, they need to adapt their pedagogies to corporate rules. Your students are no longer "students"; they are "clients" (to use the fashionable term) or "customers." To survive as a writing consultant, you've got to give your clients what they

want, and you can never forget the old cliche: "The customer is always right." But is the customer always right about what they want from a writing course?" In my experience, the answer is "Yes"--"and no." The trick is a matter of mediation: You need to give clients what they think THEY want, while making sure that they get the instruction that YOU want to give them.

Three very simple guidelines will help college teachers practice this requisite art of mediation in the corporate classroom. The first is obvious: Don't use the "F" word--"Freewriting"--in a corporate classroom. Try a more pragmatic and utilitarian term--"Speedwriting," "Speed Drafting," "Rapid Writing" have all worked well for me. Try to rename (or use the "business names" for) other concepts, too: "Mind Mapping" for "Clustering," "Thinking on Paper" for "Brainstorming," "Reader Analysis" for "Audience Profile," "Feedback from colleagues" for "Peer critique."

The second guideline is a hard-and-fast rule: "Avoid condescension." Don't cringe when corporate employees talk about "software portability" or "technology migrating to various hardware platforms." Instead, respect clients, and listen. If business or scientific "jargon" sounds "dumb" to us, we need to think about how silly we sound to outsiders when we talk about "the problematic of the supplement" or "heteroglossia that has been dialogized." When other disciplines use specialized language, we tend to view it as "jargon"--an impediment to communication; when we use specialized language, it's dignified

as enabling and meaningful "discourse." We should be open to the discourse conventions of other fields. We might learn something interesting! At least, we will learn how to be more successful consultants in the communities we're working within.

The last guideline is perhaps the most important, for it is the umbrella under which the previous two are subsumed: "Mediate between the notions of process and revision that we respect and the linear models that the business and technical communities value. As college writing teachers, we tend to shy away from mediation of this sort, fearing that it somehow compromises our commitment to the notion of writing as a process. But that does not have to be the case. To be honest, what I mean by "mediation" is a type of educational "hoodwinking," through which the teacher/consultant retains all of her powerful pedagogical tools, but cannily repackages them. I've had some success with a program I've called "Writing as Re-Vision"--which plays off of the literal meaning of re-vision, as in re-seeing through the eyes of your reader. The simple "linear" model that I present to clients outlines four very clear steps to writing success:

1. Speed draft
2. Analyze your audience
3. Revise your speed draft by seeing it through your reader's eyes
4. Finetune by eliminating excess words, correcting grammar, and adjusting punctuation.

In workshop evaluations, corporate clients have praised this model as an enabling "system." If these clients were the victims of my educational hoodwinking, they did not complain, for the results were positive--both for them and for me: They discovered a less painful way to deal with document composition, and I was hired to teach the course again. Of course, my list of steps was not really a linear model of the writing process. In fact, if anything, it merely served to remind clients that whatever is written can--and even must--be revised, that transactional writing actually is a process of re-vision, in the sense of re-seeing or re-perceiving the message from the audience's point of view.

The act of re-seeing or re-perceiving through the audience's eyes is precisely what the college English-instructor-turned-consultant must perform. As college English instructors, we identify ourselves with departmentally defined pedagogies, theories, and standards. To these agendas we dedicate ourselves; otherwise, we wouldn't be successful teachers at our institutions. As business writing consultants, however, we must subordinate such agendas to business concerns. In the corporate arena, we are no longer professors empowered by our institutions; we are, essentially, outside vendors. And like most vendors, our power ultimately lies in our ability to market our service effectively.

Marketing requires us to understand certain fundamental business principles, not the least of which concern the apex of

those famous TQM triangles academics have been seeing more and more often lately: "customer satisfaction." While the immediate and measurable results that business clients want seem antithetical to the notions of the writing process to which most of us subscribe, they are the wants and needs to which large consulting firms are responding. College English teachers can respond, too--and perhaps in more meaningful ways--by practicing the art of mediation: by giving clients what they want, while making sure that they get what we want to give them. We can bridge the academic and the business learning communities--and to be strong competitors in the writing consulting business--by realizing that in the corporate environment, the process of teaching writing, like the transactional writing process itself, is largely a matter of re-vision, of re-seeing what we have to offer through the eyes of potential clients and re-casting our pedagogies in terminology that has meaning for them.

Work Cited

Bloomfield, Caroline, and Irene Fairley. Business Communications: A Process Approach. San Diego: HBJ, 1991.